

## **Loving Our Neighbor as We Love Our Self**

Leviticus 19:17-18; Matthew 22:34-40

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Have you ever had an ill-mannered neighbor? I don't mean a neighbor who won't cut his lawn regularly or bring in his garbage can from the curb. I'm talking about a really mean neighbor, someone who does things that are beyond irritating, maybe even harmful, to you and your other neighbors.

If you've never had a truly rude neighbor, and thankfully I haven't, you need to read some of the horror stories posted on [rudeneighbor.com](http://rudeneighbor.com). Do they ever have some stories! One woman ends her horror story with these words of utter frustration, "I've had it!" And I don't blame her. This woman claims that she planted some shrubbery on her property between her house and her neighbor's house. The neighbor didn't like the shrubbery and dug it up while she was at work. She then planted a hedge to screen her house from his. He didn't like that either and cut it down to one foot tall. She had a wooden fence built, and other neighbors watched as he tore it down with his bear hands. This kind of antagonistic behavior escalated. The woman and her family lit tiki torches around their porch one evening. The neighbor called the fire department to report "an uncontrollable fire." Her husband washed and vacuumed the cars one day around noon. The neighbor called the police claiming that the vacuum cleaner was disturbing the peace. This woman says that she got to know every officer on the police force because this ill-mannered neighbor called them so often. So she told one of the police officers one day that she was going to start doing the same thing. "Every time his dog barks," she said, "I will call. Every time he turns his blower on, I will call. Every time he throws a rock or snail into my yard, I will call. Every time he peaks his head over the wall, I will report a peeping tom." "I've had it!" she concluded. ([rudeneighbor.com](http://rudeneighbor.com))

That's the kind of ill-mannered neighbor I'm talking about. Now imagine having a neighbor like that and having no resources to protect yourself. No police to call. No neighborhood association to intervene. Take yourself back thousands of years when there were no social safety nets or organized police force. Back when the Law of Moses was written, a

hungry widow and her children might starve to death, or she might turn to prostitution. If two neighbors conspired and lied about you, you might be banished from the community or stoned to death. They called it bearing false witness. If you happened to have a ruthless employer, he might not pay you, and there would be nothing you could do about it.

Frances Gerstlauer has asked that we look at this passage from the book of Leviticus where we are told to love our neighbor as we love our self. It is a beautiful teaching, isn't it, appealing to the most noble instincts within us? Until you have an ill-mannered neighbor who digs up your shrubbery. Then you're ready to go to battle. So today we have to ask, are there limits to this teaching about loving our neighbor?

The book of Leviticus is fascinating reading. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. If you've not read it recently, I highly recommend it, especially chapters seventeen through twenty-six. Since the late 1800s, this section of the book of Leviticus has been called the Holiness Code. The people of Israel were admonished to "be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (19:2). Just as their God was holy, set apart, the people of Israel too were to strive for holiness in their eating habits, their sexual behavior, social ethics, worship, family relations, and other areas of life. All of this is explained in detail in the Holiness Code of Leviticus.

The passage Frances nominated deals specifically with relationships between neighbors. Now, in their day, a "neighbor" wasn't just someone who lived near you. A neighbor was a fellow Israelite. Some of the Holiness Code deals specifically with the immigrants in their land, and the immigrants were considered to be a neighbor too. So before homeowners' associations, neighborhood covenants, and an organized police force, how were the people of Israel to relate to their neighbors, those who shared the community with them, especially when there was trouble? The Holiness Code defined proper behavior for the people of Israel. Our text for today specifically gives five examples of how to deal with neighbor problems.

*The first issue has to do with the poor and immigrant neighbors.* This was before social systems that provided aide to the indigent. This is what the Holiness Code says:

*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your*

*harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.*

In other words, when you harvest your crops, leave some behind for the poor and the immigrants to gather. That was the community's way of caring for their less fortunate neighbor.

*The second issue had to do with bearing false witness.* You may remember that bearing false witness is the ninth of the Ten Commandments. This was a serious matter. They didn't have DNA testing, finger printing, lie detectors and other sophisticated testing to determine guilt or innocence. They depended upon one's word. If someone lied about his neighbor and got a friend to agree with him, their word would hold up in a court of law. Their lies could have their neighbor stoned to death. This was called bearing false witness, and that is why it was so serious. This is what the Holiness Code says,

*You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another. And you shall not swear falsely by my name....*

*The third issue was about fraud.* The powerless had little recourse against the powerful. The powerful could steal from them, hold their wages, and the powerless had little means for seeking justice. It was like speaking a curse upon a deaf person or putting a stumbling block before a blind person. So the Holiness Code admonished them not to defraud one another.

*The fourth issue was about showing partiality.* They were not to show partiality toward the poor when seeking justice. Likewise, they were not to defer to the rich. Justice was justice and no one's rights were to be violated.

*This brings us now to the last and most important example.* It is the culmination of this entire section, an umbrella teaching that covers everything else about relating to a neighbor. I want to read it again because every part of this is important:

*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your*

*people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.*

Okay, let's imagine that something happened that was not covered in the first four examples. Say someone called the fire department because his neighbor burned tiki torches in the backyard. That issue specifically was not covered in the examples, so what do you do then? This passage says that they were to love their neighbor as their own self. Love of neighbor was to be an overarching principle. They were not to hate their neighbor. Why? We already know this. Hate is like unforgiveness. It hurts only you. There were other options. Notice that it says that you *shall* reprove your neighbor. That means to reprimand or challenge. They were not to be their neighbor's doormat and allow him to wipe his feet on them. They were not to take vengeance or hold a grudge. When they did that, they were simply acting like him. The Holiness Code was calling to people of Israel to a higher level. Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

Do you realize that this is the only teaching Jesus pulled from the Holiness Code? There are other teachings about what to eat, how men should cut their hair, how cattle are to be bred and others. Jesus didn't pull those out, but he did this principle about loving our neighbor as we love our self. In fact, according to Jesus, the only thing that is more important than loving our neighbor is loving God. Here is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount:

*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. (Matthew 7:12)*

It is more than a beautiful teaching. It is the essence of what it means to be a person of faith. It is a way of life that is the hope of a civilized society. It is a way of strength and gentleness, justice and grace, protection and provision. It doesn't mean you'll never have to call the police on an ill-mannered neighbor or enforce a neighborhood covenant. Sometimes that is the loving thing to do. It does mean that our actions always will be governed by love. Frances, thank you for nominating this text.

#### Closing Prayer

You are holy, Lord, and we feel far from it. Help us to be holy, as you are holy. Amen.